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## Propers 27 (Pentecost 25) Series C 2016

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## **Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – November 6**

The cycle of readings we call the pericopes was developed in Europe which is in the northern hemisphere. One can detect a certain congruence with the seasons in the cycle. As the season of growth and productivity draws to a close, the Church year does as well. Of course this only works for us in the Northern Hemisphere, the equatorial and southern hemisphere Christians must scratch their heads a little at this.

For the northern folks, however, the dry leaves and dark days that mark this season seem the natural time for us to focus on the end of things. This season of the Church began with Pentecost's hopeful outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and it ends with an equally bright festival, Christ the King which caps off the year on November 24. The Sundays which lead up to that brilliant day, however, are often marked by a certain darkness, an acrid taste in the mouth, a smell of smoke in the air. The leaves which blow about our yards this time of the year presage the new life which will come again in the spring when Easter will once more be celebrated. But in this time we look forward to Easter's promise fulfilled. The time of the Church ends with us looking ahead to the resurrection of all the dead.

All Saints Day gets us started thinking that way, and the readings for the whole month of November continue in that vein. We can look unflinchingly at the dying of this world because we do so in hope. The world, because it lacks that hope, must look away in a denial of death and all that it entails. Not so with us. Hearing the promise that is in the resurrection, we can look upon grim death. It is not a pretty picture, to watch a world dying. This was not how this was all supposed to end. Genesis 1 and 2 asks that we imagine another ending to this story, an ending that does not take the detour through sin and cross. We must weep when we think of what was lost that day when Adam and Eve first transgressed and brought the whole creation down with them. As Paul says in Romans 8, the whole creation groans waiting for the sons of light to be revealed, the sons who were shrouded in sin so long ago and which had to be recreated in baptism.

This means we will come to the great questions of the day with a little different spin on them. Yes, the world is going to pot. The ice caps are melting and the weather might be going totally wild, but we are not entirely surprised by that. Yes, we do believe that this world is good and to preserve it as well as we can is an obligation that lies upon every human being. Thus we will get out there and recycle and compost. But we do not get all dewy-eyed when Al Gore comes moralizing about the environment. Our hope does not lie in the salvation which mankind has to offer to this problem. Our hopefulness is in One who is far greater than the whole of mankind. If Babel teaches us nothing, let it teach us that. God had to stoop down to see the tower that the citizens of Babel built. The solutions which we can throw up against our deepest problems will always be laughably small. The salvation of the world is not to be found in clean renewable energy but in the One who created the world the first time re-creating it. This is the One who is the very definition of pure, clean, and ever-renewing.

Through these readings we will stare death in the face today and Jesus will not flinch, nor should we. If our hope is only for this world, we are the most pitiable of all men. Death does not have the victory, the last word shall not be spoken by our tombstones, but by our living, resurrected, and loving God. His Word is a word of life. We shall acknowledge the power of death. No one gets out of this thing alive, at least outside of Enoch, Elijah and maybe Moses. The rest of us become the stuff of the earth, the biomass which spawns the next generations. It is true but mercifully incomplete. The grave shall not have us forever, nor even for all that long.

As we think about the end of the world, what questions are on the minds of our hearers?

1. The Election! *Much of the rhetoric around this particular election cycle has been driven by apocalyptic claims made by one party or the other, insisting that this or that candidate is the only one who can stave off the apocalypse which will certainly befall us if the other is elected. Is this useful or just too hot for a preacher to use this Sunday?*
2. Election, predestination, “Why some and not others?!” *This is a difficult question to which there is not a really satisfying answer. We proclaim God’s love, not this sort of an answer and Scripture really does not reveal it. There is much about God which is hidden, but what is revealed is his love for all people. We love to be “in” on a secret and that temptation leads many to error here.*
3. How do we know that the Biblical promises/statements about the end will be true? What if it really turns out very differently? How can it be that the dead will rise? *God’s Word is trustworthy – but at the same time we have the tendency to think we have God figured out. The Christian needs to come to the end of the world discussions with a great deal of humility about exactly what will happen. Remember the Jewish people were so certain they knew God’s OT word that they missed the first appearing of the Messiah. He came contrary to their expectations.*
4. Why is God so secretive about the date thing? *The reveals what is good for us. Would you really want to know? What would you do with that knowledge? Would that be good? Or would you misbehave until the last minute and quick repent?*
5. Security – how can I be sure that I am not a goat? How can I be one of the sheep? The whole question of judgment looms large over this and my conscience wants to accuse me. *Jesus promise is what we need here. It is not my behavior, decision, or even getting the faith piece right that gets me into heaven. It is Jesus who does that. Baptism is a beautiful thing here. It is true no matter what I have done, thought, said, or been. My head was wet, that is always true.*
6. What about my dead dog/cat or other pet? Will my daughter’s silly and now deceased hamster be there? *Who knows? I think it says something about us that we are so worked up about these questions.*

7. Some things we read about are really odd and have such wildly divergent opinions. The rapture, a millennial kingdom, etc., get some of my friends worked up. Some think the millennium has already started, others are looking for it to start after Jesus comes. What is the truth there? *See the answer to number 3 above. It is often not what we don't know which is a problem, but the things we are pretty sure that we do know which are really our biggest problems! What we need to hear and believe in the midst of all these confusing things is that steady voice of Jesus who assures us that he loves us and all this is in His steady and capable hands.*
8. What about the unbelievers, unbaptized, the aborted children, the still births, etc? *The reformed suggest that innocents have nothing to worry about. Lutherans on the other hand commend all these to the mercy and goodness of God.*

### **Collect of the Day**

Living God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy and pity. Grant us the fullness of Your grace to lay hold of Your promises and live forever in your presence; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*God is the living God. The Bible calls him the very source of life itself. In what I think is the very best Lutheran illustration of this in all the world, you can imagine that the whole world is like a great pot of coffee, one of those huge aluminum urns that lurk in the basement of most churches. Creation started out plugged into God, but sin pulled the plug. Adam did not live forever, but for a very long time, over 900 years. The pot of coffee will not cool to room temperature immediately, but it will take a while. So with us and the world, born alive, we begin an inexorable march toward death because we are by nature disconnected from the very source of our "heat," our "life." Since that first day of sin, the world has been cooling off. Our lives are now 70-80 years said the Psalmist. For all our medicine, we can get more folks to those numbers, but we cannot get them far past it.*

*His almighty power is not shown in great works of wrath, the thunder and lightning, the earthquake or even in rending the heavenly bodies. His power is shown chiefly in showing mercy and pity. The strong have nothing to fear from the failings of the weak. God has the power, what he really wants is our hearts.*

*We might want to spend a little time on the word "pity." That word does not leap to mind for many as a verb we would associate with God. Has "showing pity" become a thing which is changing for us? Is it a negative emotion? Are we offended when someone says they pity us? Is it really a form of insult? If I say "I pity you" or "I pity the person who has to do this..." are we really speaking negatively? Is that what feels so odd here? Or is this a function of the very human reaction which wants us to be self-sufficient, and which rebels at the idea that we might be pitied? How can we be pitied if we have the Spirit of God? Does this require us to be cognizant of the tension of sinner and saint?*

*We ask God to grant us a fullness of grace so that we can lay hold of his promise and live forever in his presence. The promise is given, but we cannot even lay hold of that. So crippled are we by sin, the life preserver hits us on the head and would push us under the waves except God lift our arms, grab us from the destruction which overtakes us, and rescues us to live in his presence. Again, the fundamental conflict with our culture arises. We are not competent when it comes to spiritual matters. We can no more decide for Jesus than a stone is capable of making that decision. Yet, my students in my classes do not see this. For them the Bible is the set of rules that they can keep and make God happy if only they choose to do so. Do the people in our pews think the same way? You would be surprised how many of them do.*

*But the request granted is a great request and God does hear this prayer and grant this request. He enables us to lay hold of that gift. If we deny that, we have another problem entirely. To lay hold of the promises and live forever in the presence of God is the very thing we celebrated last week with All Saints Day. They are in the presence of the almighty and gracious God, they have the beatific vision. God loves to bring people to that place, to that sight. It's why he sent his only-begotten into the world to die on that cross.*

Exodus 3:1-15

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

<sup>13</sup> Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has

sent me to you.”<sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”<sup>16</sup> *Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt,”<sup>17</sup> and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’”*

*This important and complex text is part of the root stock of the Old Testament and the faith of the children of Abraham, including Christians who are also children of Abraham. Of course this is the launch point of the Exodus, the event which defines God’s OT people. Read Exodus 20 and you will see that one keeps the Ten Commandments because the LORD is the God who brought us up out of the land of Egypt.*

*We might notice that God’s timing was strange. The people of Israel had been suffering a very long time. He was watching and observing this the whole time. The cry of the Israelites did not fall on deaf ears, but now, 80 years after Moses own brush with death and the hands of Pharaoh, God was finally doing something about it. How many Israelite infants died waiting for this day? What does this say about God? What does this say about his work on our behalf? Surely it is not always on our time table!*

*The slavery of the Israelites is a very contemporary thing. Lots of people are physically in slavery today. But many are also enslaved to their own sins and troubles. Some are enslaved to broken and really monstrous systems. Think of the poor folks who live under the tyranny of the drug lords in the border lands of Mexico. Think about the people who toil in the bleak kingdom of North Korea. Think about the man who is trapped in a job which has not hope for him, or a homeless man who is enslaved to his situation. Without money he cannot get the education the jobs require. Without the education he cannot get the job to earn the money to pay for the education. It is often a vicious cycle, a slavery of another sort*

*God notices the slavery and does something about it. He heard the cries of those folks, he hears the cries and notices the plight of people today. This is not a different God than our God. It often seems to us that our prayers fall on deaf ears. The grieving parents of the Israelites in Egypt who prayed for decades without apparent relief must have felt the same way. I cannot explain God’s responses, I can only trust him.*

*He calls Moses. God rarely does what we think he should do. Calling an 80 year old shepherd is not the first course of action we might take. But then again, an infant lying in the manger looks like a most unlikely Savior. A carpenter hanging on a cross, a piece of wood hewn by carpentry, doesn’t look like our victor and messiah, but a loser.*

*God's call is almost always extended to the unwilling. Moses does not self-appoint, but tries to get out of it. Just because we don't want to do what God wants us to do is not a disqualification! God supplies what is necessary, what is more, as he told Moses, "I will go with you – that is all you really need."*

*This last point is important. This is the paradigm call event in the OT. All other prophetic and pastoral calls stand in the shadow of this event. Notice that Moses does not want to go. Anyone who seeks the office of prophet/preacher is almost disqualified by the desire for the office. (I sometimes think we could solve a lot of issues in presidential politics this way, if you want the job, you are disqualified.) I always tell my students on campus that if anyone ever declares themselves to be a prophet or a preacher on their own authority in their presence their first act should be to put their hand on their wallet and hang on tight. He's probably going to go for your money first. Is that cynical of me? Probably. Is it true a disturbing amount of the time? Absolutely.*

*Moses does not want to go. This is reasonable on his part, the excuses he gives are the sorts of things that would give us pause before electing someone to the board of elders at our parish. He is 80 years old after all and still working the shepherd thing. What is more he has spent time in that court of Pharaoh and that did not go so well. God has, however, another flock for him to shepherd through the dry deserts of Sinai. He calls.*

*I think that another important point is the whole issue of holiness. Moses must take his shoes off. He hides his face. This is not a safe place. While I think this can certainly be overdone, I really do believe that we have gone too far in the other direction with chummy worship and a casual attitude toward the things of Church. Is there still a way to have holy places, holy times, and holy people? Our friends in Orthodoxy and Catholicism might have something to teach us about that. If you forget someone on Christmas morning, in Portland you can always run down to the airport and shop in the stores there which are required to be open every day of the year. Do we really need a place to be open on Christmas day? Is there a call for holy people these days? What does it mean to be a holy person? What about the altar in our churches? Is that a holy place? Why or why not?*

*The last point of this text is the one that will get picked up by the Gospel lesson. Moses finally asks just who it is that is sending him. What name shall he give? This was actually a very provocative question for Moses to ask. Names were a very important thing in the ancient world. To know the name of something is to have power over it. By asking for God's name, Moses was really seeking something powerful. God's enigmatic answer has given people of faith occasion to think for millennia. "I AM WHO I AM" In Hebrew "ehyeh, asher ehyeh."*

*What makes this so interesting is that when Moses shows up and the people ask him this question, he does not respond with these exact words. He uses the form which is in the material which immediately follows these words. In effect he conjugates the verb. It comes out "Yahweh asher Yahweh" or in English, "He is who he is." It would seem that only God can use that phrase in the first person. We can only say it in the third or perhaps the second person if we find*

*ourselves confronted by him. This is why Jesus will get into so much trouble in the first century. The Septuagint had translated this phrase I AM, but they had used an unusual construction to do it. "Ego eimi" normally Greek would have just used "eimi." Because this is a conjugated language, the verb contains the pronoun, to distinguish this from the others, they included the emphatic pronoun here. When Jesus starts to use this word in his many "I am..." phrases in the Gospels, he always inserts the "Ego." This is why they are so upset with him after what seems like rather innocuous statements on his part. When Jesus declares "I am the bread of life" we should almost have "I AM the bread of life" in our text to indicate just how oddly he says this and to what the crowds are reacting.*

*This will show up in the Gospel text however in a slightly different way. There the issue will not be that Jesus uses the "I AM" but he will make a very interesting and subtle point based on the tense of the verb.*

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights!

<sup>2</sup> Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his hosts!

<sup>3</sup> Praise him, sun and moon,  
praise him, all you shining stars!

<sup>4</sup> Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

<sup>5</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD!  
For he commanded and they were created.

<sup>6</sup> And he established them forever and ever;  
he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

<sup>7</sup> Praise the LORD from the earth,  
you great sea creatures and all deeps,

<sup>8</sup> fire and hail, snow and mist,  
stormy wind fulfilling his word!

<sup>9</sup> Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!

<sup>10</sup> Beasts and all livestock,  
creeping things and flying birds!

<sup>11</sup> Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!



- <sup>12</sup> Young men and maidens together,  
old men and children!
- <sup>13</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his majesty is above earth and heaven.
- <sup>14</sup> He has raised up a horn for his people,  
praise for all his saints,  
for the people of Israel who are near to him.  
Praise the LORD!

*The psalmist enjoins the whole of creation to praise the LORD. It is our post-enlightenment thought processes which find this so odd. Christians have acquiesced on this so much we don't even see it as an issue. We have limited our concern for God to a personal, internal concern and forgotten that he is also concerned about the rivers, mountains, and forests. Material reductionism (the belief that the physical universe is really all there is and that the claims for a spiritual reality are superstition) has served for many of our people to disconnect God from the world in which they live. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century we have noted a "withdrawal" of God from the everyday speech and thought of people. This psalm is rooted within a completely different way of thinking.*

*Could we preach this? If we are looking at death today and in this end of the world season, we really want to have this piece in place. God made the world, he loves the world. It lives and exists in relationship to him. The ending of the world is not due to God's neglect or hatred of this physical world, but it is due to God's love and intense interest in its restoration to its rightful place in relationship with him.*

## II Thessalonians 2:1-8, 13-17

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. <sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. <sup>9</sup> *The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is*

false,<sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

<sup>13</sup> But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.<sup>14</sup> To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

<sup>16</sup> Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace,<sup>17</sup> comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

*If there is a message about the end of the world which the Christians of North America need to hear, this is it: “Do not be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed...” and “the Lord Jesus Christ himself...comfort(s) your hearts and establishes them in every good work and word.” So much of the current publishing on the subject seems designed to instill fear in people. Yet, the NT writers, writing to people who often had real reasons to be afraid are consistently saying, “Don’t be afraid” or “let this calm your fears.” The epistle readings in November will all be of this vein. Yes, the day is coming, yes there is much to fear on that day, but the reason for the day, the reason the Lord comes is to rescue you his people, so rejoice that the day draws nearer.*

*Yet, a quick perusal of the “Left Behind” or the other works of Le Hay or Walvoord or one of the many others whose pernicious texts fill our bookstores, establishes that these guys are not here to calm people’s fears but to incite and inflame those fears. That puts them squarely outside the biblical witness. But people often have itching ears. It is a little like those who would line up for the roller coaster. When we feel safe, we will pay for a little fear, perhaps just to know that we are alive. The problem here is that this obsession with fear has obscured the Gospel itself. Revelation is a beautiful word which speaks of God’s great love.*

*Paul is calming fearful folks down here. The end comes but God establishes us in Christ. That means we have the end of that story all taken care of. What can our enemy do to us that will make any real difference? Approach that day with confidence and even joyful anticipation.*

*Another interesting way to look or consider the end of the age is to look at our films. Our age is a self-idolatrous age – we have made ourselves into our Gods. Thus, we do not look for God to come and destroy us, we imagine that we will do this to ourselves, most often expressed as some ecological catastrophe. If we don’t do it to ourselves, something inside the universe does. In films lately the destruction often comes in the form of some alien power which overwhelms us – an invasion of bug like creatures or some scaly monstrosity from another dimension. I am quite convinced that we can do terrible evil to ourselves, but are we really talking about the end of the world when the polar ice caps melt? Could it be that God will bring it all to an end that way? It might well be. He might also send giant aliens to squash humanity out of existence, but I rather think all of this misses the mark by a great deal.*

Luke 20:27-40

<sup>27</sup> There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, <sup>28</sup> and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. <sup>29</sup> Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. <sup>30</sup> And the second <sup>31</sup> and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. <sup>32</sup> Afterward the woman also died. <sup>33</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.”

<sup>34</sup> And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, <sup>35</sup> but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, <sup>36</sup> for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. <sup>37</sup> But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. <sup>38</sup> Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.” <sup>39</sup> Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” <sup>40</sup> For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

*I call this the grammarian's favorite passage of Scripture. Jesus proves a central doctrine of the faith by a point of grammar. The whole argument that Jesus makes hinges on the tense of the verb. When God says “I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” those patriarchs were already dead. He does not say “I was...” God is the god of the living, not of the dead. Therefore, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob live because God declares His relationship to them in the present tense, not the past tense. Jesus has gotten himself into hot water with this “I Am” talk before and this suggests that he has thought pretty hard about this passage. It is central to his whole ministry in fact.*

*A little background helps here. The Sadducees asserted that there was no resurrection, there was only this life. This was quite convenient for the Sadducees because they were in active collaboration with the Roman authorities. They asserted that one had to make the best of this life because that was all one got. It also appears that they only accepted the authority of the Torah and not the rest of the books of the OT, just the five books of Moses.*

*In the face of the Sadducees' understanding that when one died one was utterly annihilated, Jesus' little grammatical point proved to be a point they could not refute. It was from the Torah, it attested to the current life of Abraham long after he died. The crowds were amazed at what Jesus said and no one dared to ask any more questions. In addition to be a miracle worker, Jesus is also a stud grammarian, at least that is what all the Greek students are thinking right now. If only parsing verbs could instill such awe today.*

*But the argument actually has real merit on a couple of fronts. First of all, Jesus certainly is portrayed as taking his Bible quite seriously. This Bible is not simply a collection of generally true moralizing stories which are nice, but don't push the details too far. In this sort of an idea*

*one might assert that God rescued folks from Egypt, but did they really cross the Red Sea on dry ground? In its extreme form it will understand the whole exodus as a fiction, a story which was intended to teach us something of what they thought God was like.*

*Jesus' approach here will have none of that. Not only does he read the stories as being real, he reads significant theology into the grammar itself. Horace Hummel at Concordia Seminary used to talk about the "blessed hiphil" a particular stem of the Hebrew verb. This is a sort of reading of the Bible that is not terribly fashionable since the enlightenment. It is too uncomfortable for "thoughtful" people, or is it perhaps just too uncomfortable for the autonomous people that the enlightenment wants us to think we are? If the Bible is literally true, are we forced to admit that we are not actually in control? Absolutely!*

*On a second front this is of course really interesting. The Old Testament is a proof text of one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith: The resurrection of the dead. It is informative, I believe, to notice that this happens in Holy Week. The Sadducees are trying to trip up Jesus to give them an excuse to move against him and be rid of this troublesome Galilean preacher. But Jesus intends to die on Friday, they are not the instigators of the action here, but are really helpless before him. He is the master of this situation. But he cannot pass by the opportunity to talk about resurrection. Their question to him is an opportunity. He flat out tells them they don't have a clue what they are talking about. But he doesn't just leave it there. He wants to point to this resurrection.*

*As we come to the discussion of the end of the world, this is an essential component of the Christian's faith. In I Corinthians 15, Paul tells us that if our hope is only for this world, we are the most pitiable of all men. But our hope is not only of this world. We have a hope for a future that goes beyond the grave and into eternity. This enables us to face death, all of its horror. Jesus would come to the cross itself and not flinch from its terror, but willingly and humbly bear its burden.*

*We now are called upon to face the end of all things. It may happen in our life, it might not. We don't know as Paul says, but we do not need to panic nor do we need to pretend it isn't going to happen. We can face it with both courage and hope along with the very natural fear that all people have of this ending. We have hope because of Christ's work and promise. We have courage because we know how the story will end. The prayer we spoke in the collect is answered.*

*So what will we say to the people of God this day? What shall we proclaim from the pulpit?*

**Law**

1. This world comes to an end – if the environment, war, or some natural calamity doesn't get us, our own bodies will betray us. To think that we shall not die is foolishness.
2. That death terrorizes us. Our natural and human reaction to this is to be afraid and fear often is not a terribly rational thing. Culturally we seem to be awakening to our own mortality after a long sleepy denial. Modernity continues to hold out the wan hope that we will make some scientific discovery that will solve all the problems, but increasingly I see my students are not buying that. I don't know about you, but I found Al Gore's movie rather amusing. The world is going to end. Is this news? It seems to have been to him. In much the same way that the Sadducees seem to have spent a lot of energy on thinking up this scenario of the woman who married the seven brothers, we too can invest great amounts of our time and energy into self-delusion when it comes to the end.
3. Even if we do not go into full blown denial, Fear is such a lousy motivator of people. It works some of the time to conform us externally, but it doesn't really change us. This is the critical failure of those in the Environmental movement today who are the closest thing we have to apocalyptic prophets. They can only see change coming through fear and so they want to make people afraid.
4. Denial is not the only response we have to the end of the world. Another is enslavement to the world which we would save. The environmentalists today, the moralists of yesterday, the war on poverty, civil rights, and the new deal all have been understood to be by some a manifestation of the kingdom come, a kingdom which demands our obedience. In one sense, any good thing can be a view into the kingdom of God, but the Christian always understands that it is a "now and not-yet" sort of a thing. Even the Church itself is wrapped up in this dying. God sometimes intervenes, but until that last day the interventions never really save the place.
5. The church has too often looked to the next world and forgotten about the present world. But the breaking of this world grieves God sorely. He made it, he loves it, and its undoing is a great sorrow to him.
6. Evil is pernicious. God creates good, but evil is simply the warping of the good. You can destroy something good, but you can never really eliminate the evil, or at least the potential for evil, because evil is truly something good that has been twisted. As long as there is something good, evil lurks around the corner.
7. But all of this is really just a form of forgetfulness. The "I AM" who simply is creates another picture of this world. All the fussing over the cause of the day can ultimately boil itself down to idolatry. The man who strives tirelessly to save this world may do so because he has lost sight of the fact that it too is a servant, a dependent existence.

Nothing has any being without the “I AM” giving it that existence. And nothing can lose its existence or keep it without his nod.

## **Gospel**

1. Jesus is in holy week. He goes to a cross, yes to die, but also to rise again, the first of many. This is the hope we celebrated last week with the feast of All Saints and these readings will not let us forget it. That which the world calls the end, is not the end.
2. This life hangs not on me and my effort but upon the very nature of God which is revealed in his name. This is what Reformation day was all about two weeks ago. This is not by my deeds, but his.
3. This means we can look death in the eye and conquer our fear of it. We can contemplate the very destruction of the world and not be unhinged. Our existence does not hang on our ability to hang together, but on God’s great memory. Even if my DNA is irrevocably lost, at His Word I shall answer him like Moses in the text for today “Here I am” (This, by the way, is the way that school children answer roll call in Israel today: “Hinenni” or “Here I am.”)
4. This also frees up our lives. Fear is an incredibly debilitating emotion. Jesus has assured us today that God holds his people in mind for eternity. There are some things we don’t have to worry about. But God has this under control and means we can tame our fear and think about another motivation. In the case of the doomsayers who proclaim the world is coming to an environmental end, we can be grieved by that, and in love for that which God loves, we can work mightily for this good creation. Not because we can save it, but because we know that we are serving something that God loves dearly. We may in this be put side by side with those who are enslaved. This gives them an opportunity to see my joy instead of my fear? My goal in environmental action is that it preserves a life to celebrate in joy.
5. In Jesus, God was reconciling the whole world to himself, not only the people, but also the critters, the rocks and the flowers too. He loves this world. He is not thinking of another world, but he loves this one. How do we show that? This is Kingdom Citizenry in action, the freely given gift that God has given to me shown to another. The caring of the environment becomes then an act of worship.
6. God cares deeply for this world. Evil so often thinks that it has won and out of its vicious teeth God works another good. He is likely not done doing that. From the horrors of oppression he works deep faith. From the persecutions which afflicted the church throughout her history he has created much good. From the personal tragedies that we have experienced, we can look back and see his kind hand. Tragedy or suffering of any kind now becomes for us an occasion to expect God to do something

good for us. Ultimately it will result in the best of all. Out of our death he works a new life that does not know death. Evil finally and fully will be conquered, and only the good will be then. How that can be, I can hardly imagine.

7. And so in a cross, in word and sacrament, God establishes his “I AM” claim upon my whole life and upon this whole world. Like orphaned children we now have a family created by God. Like corpses, powerless and helpless, he has taken us and raised us up to newness of life.
8. The really great part of this is that he does not only wait until the last day to show this, but in the living of my life right now, the “I AM” claim of God shows up for others to see as well. This too is a creation of God.

### **Sermon Themes:**

1. Courage rooted in the Resurrection (OT and Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would give the gift of courage to our people.)

This sermon proclaims a courage which is rooted in the promise of God. Death is not the end of the story. Nor are the many ways that the world would suggest that we might “die” in other ways. Jesus speaks of it in the Gospel and God bear witness to this in the OT. God is still the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though they have been dead for centuries at this point in the narrative. That courage will face down death because it knows and trusts God that death’s threats, the worst it can do, are not the end of the story. God’s word, his living word, is the end of the story, the goal and the last element. The grave, at his command, will have to surrender its victims to new life.

The law will need to be carefully articulated in this sermon. Death is real, but the world would have us die in a number of ways. Death of reputation, death of the respect of the world, etc., can all be excruciating and terrifying for folks. History suggests that when the Devil acts openly and threatens the lives of God’s saints, God often awakens a tremendous courage in their hearts. The comfortable Christians, and let’s admit that is most of North American Christianity, are often more afraid of these minor ways of dying. They are acting out of that fear.

Perhaps one will want to address the meaning of the word courage. Courageous people will tell you that they are still afraid, but they don’t act upon that fear but rather upon some other principle. The firemen who charge into a burning building or a policeman who runs toward the sounds of gunfire is afraid, but he or she is brave, courageous because he or she acts upon another thing than their fear. That other motive could be duty, it could be love, or it could be something else. The Christian will act not upon our fear, but upon God’s love and promise for us. The cancer patient, the person facing

surgery, the parent who is trying to confront a child, all are people who are reasonably afraid of something, but they are brave in that they act not upon the fear but upon something else.

This trust in the promises of God engenders courage in the face of Satan's many threats. Of course the clearest example of this sort of courage is the Christian who bravely faces his or her own suffering and perhaps death. Recently I heard of two Christians in Iran who were given 80 lashes with a whip for drinking wine at the sacrament. If you have a Sudanese community in your town, or a community of Christians from any of the Moslem dominated parts of the world you might find a great story there and a witness to this.

But martyrdom, while perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of this courage, is hardly the only way we can see it. I know a woman who stood up for her principles at work, refused to falsify a document her boss demanded she falsify. She realized it would cost her the job, it did, and she did it anyway. Sometimes just admitting one goes to Church on Sunday in certain crowds takes a measure of courage. Sometimes sharing one's faith with a neighbor or a friend takes great courage. Sometimes just getting out of bed to face another day of chemotherapy or another day without the husband or wife who died last year takes great courage. Sometimes the desperate courage of otherwise anonymous folks is the real story. We see the vivid examples, but they are best seen as manifestations of the gift God gives to us all in faith.

The preacher will want to identify but not dwell too long on the things which would enervate us, causing us to wilt and cower before them. They are all from a singular source but they take so many forms. He will need to realize that fear is not rational, you cannot argue people out of fear, but you can instill courage. Courage does not mean you stop being afraid. Courage simply means that you act not upon the fear but upon the promise which God has made to us. God gives courage (heart) as a gift to us. In Ezekiel he tells us that he will turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, living hearts which beat to the rhythm of God's love. Those hearts are filled with his courage.

It was the presence and promise of God which encouraged Moses. Moses wondered how it was that he was called upon to free the people of Israel, God concurred, it was not Moses, but it was God who was with Moses who would do this. Likewise we might consider the earliest Christians. It was the presence and promise of God which turned fearful disciples, huddled in the upper room, into the fearless proclaimers of Jesus at Pentecost. It was the presence and promise of God which emboldened Luther in the days of the Reformation, and it is that same life giving presence and promise which emboldens us today.

One really should have a story of courage to preach this sermon. The parent who confronts the wayward child may well have to admit his or her mistakes. That is a sort of dying, to admit one's mistakes to your own child. There is a courage which admits that



this young person will do what they do and all I can do is love them no matter what. Courage may not seek control but give it up and trust the bond of love.

2. I am always in the present tense to Him. (That the Spirit of God would comfort his people with the promise of resurrection)

Jesus makes a most interesting assertion about God today which is worthy of a sermon. The God of the living is my God always. That means I am always in the present tense to God, just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were God's people, even though they had to our eyes been long dead. God is the God of the living, and he still claimed them centuries after their funerals.

He makes the same claim about us, and continues to make that claim about us for all time. He meant what he said in our baptism about being his children. He not only never forgets us, but because being, including our being, is a function of his thought/self, being on God's mind means we exist. If that is a little too metaphysical for you, you can just say that God simply does not listen to the date on our tombstone which records our death. We are always alive to him and that means we are always alive. He is the author of life, and when he writes my name on his hand, I live.

The law here is death itself. Death is easily enough portrayed as the dissolution of life. We put bodies into the ground for a very good reason. I love the technical term for this – putrefaction. It is the process of decay. Our bodies literally start falling apart the moment we die. We want to deny that. We embalm, we put bodies in metal caskets and concrete vaults. But we are kidding ourselves and enriching funeral home directors. Cemeteries are becoming toxic waste problems because of all the formaldehyde we are putting in the ground and I read somewhere that we use enough metal in caskets to build the golden gate bridge every year. And yet, those people embalmed and thus preserved are still dead.

The preacher may also want to read the very interesting recent statement from Pope Francis about the dispersal of ashes. The respect for the body which is evident in that document should give us pause to reconsider how we treat the bodies of our loved ones.

Death indeed asserts a claim over us, and it is imperative that we steer clear of the gnostic shoals on this one, it claims not only our body but also our minds and our whole self. It is not the case that we sort of flit off as some disembodied spirit at the point of death. We are dead, a disembodied human spirit is as dead as a physical body without a spirit. To suggest that a spiritual, non-corporeal existence is really life as God created it, is simply not reading your Bible carefully.

But our life does not flow from my ability to keep things together. It comes from God and in this Gospel text Jesus has some very good news for us. He who is the very source of our being is not intimidated or overcome by death and its claim over us. Death's claim is but a temporary thing. I have never left the mind of God and he refutes that claim and his word is life. You might find interesting a study of when Jesus confronts dead people. It is

almost as if he doesn't see death. They are always, "sleeping" or something like that. Jesus acts as if they are not dead. He speaks to corpses and they answer! I recently asked a class of students who were studying the New Testament with me what sort of books were the Gospels? If they went into Barnes and Noble, in what section would they find a book like Matthew, Mark, or Luke? I suggested that they would be found among the zombie fiction that is so popular because there are all these dead people rising. They disagreed, but I hope they thought about it.

Other Sermons Ideas we could develop:

3. Sola Scriptura – God's Precise Word. (Gospel – that the hearer would count on the promises of God which he articulates in scripture.)

This is a sermon about the text itself – God's Word is not a vague or vacuous communication or some self-revealing product of the community. It is a message from God which has important things to hear and those things are found even in the minutiae of the text. Paying close attention to the Word of God pays huge dividends.

4. Persuasion – God and his enemies. (Gospel and OT – that the hearer would participate in God's earnest and repeated attempts to bring the Gospel even to his enemies.)

The Sadducees held to a very convenient religion which was hardly recognizable to Jesus' authentic Jewish faith. They did not hold to a resurrection, to the spiritual world at all. They only accepted the Torah and that as a moral guide. Yet, Jesus reasons with them, he appeals to them, plays by their own rules, arguing from the Torah exclusively.

5. The Whole Creation Praises God! (Psalm – that the hearer would cheerfully and openly join the whole of creation in praising God.)

This sermon really has in mind the current cultural view of the world as somehow cut off from God, a mechanical and explainable universe in which all is simply attributable to DNA, physics, and chemistry. This text will not seek to refute the descriptions and useful conclusions of science, but will urge the hearer to notice that behind the physics, chemistry, and other observed phenomena stands the creator and mover of it all. The clouds and stars, the mountains and valleys, the whole of creation in its precise and beautiful orchestration renders praise to God with us.

Why does God ask Moses to take off his sandals? His feet are engaged in worship!

6. Do Not be Quickly Shaken or Alarmed! (Epistle – that the hearer would be inoculated from fear-mongering by the comfort and promise afforded them in Christ and the Spirit.)

This sermon seeks to prepare the hearer for the day when someone will try to scare them with the end of the world. If you folks are already scared, you have another sermon to preach. This sermon is really a form of inoculation. Paul was addressing people who were excessively worked up by the thought of the world's immanent ending. He assures them that the important questions are already answered. Jesus has won for them a

righteousness which stands on that last day and a comfort which calms their heart today.  
It is in God's beautiful and perforated hands.